

Fig. 1. Plastic Handbag, ca. 1950s. Toronto Metropolitan University
FRC2013.99.010. Photograph by Laura Dionne, October 15th, 2020.



THE PLIGHT OF THE COPYCAT LUCITE BAG

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November 25, 2020

INTRODUCING LUCITE

During the 1950's, translucent plastic handbags were booming in popularity (Johnson). These small, unique handbags were made of an incredibly translucent material called Lucite. The trendy Lucite bags from the 1950's were extraordinary, as designers created stunning motifs, added rhinestones, sparkles, shells, gold leaf and various other striking embellishments. In the 1950's, the authentic Lucite handbags were very expensive and by the 1960's, they were rendered almost obsolete. The extinction of this fashion trend left consumers bombarded with fake, cheap and manufactured handbags attempting to replicate the beautiful Lucite bags from the 1950's. The Toronto Metropolitan University Fashion Research Collection received a donation including one of these replica Lucite handbags. Although this bag may not be made of authentic Lucite, it still holds its own beauty with the tortoise shell pattern, floral motif, and ribbed edges.

OBJECT ANALYSIS

The framework I used for this analysis was from *The Dress Detective* by Ingrid Mida and Alexandra Kim. While looking at the handbag at the Toronto Metropolitan University Fashion Research Collection, I completed the checklist for reflection and observation, which helped me consider all aspects of this object.

The handbag in the Toronto Metropolitan University Fashion Research Collection is a 1950's plastic purse with an amber and black tortoise shell pattern. The bag has a tortoise shell pattern and a scalloped design. The mold is referred to as the shell because of the hard plastic exterior. The handbag's colours and patterns are meant to mimic handbags that used real tortoise shell, but some consumers were opting for a brighter plastic pattern (Tortoise- Shell Bags Enter Style Picture). The lid is a burnt yellow colour with a floral motif detail from the casting. The bottom of the purse has four small "feet" that aid the bag to stand straight, perfect for a woman to display the bag! It has two plastic handles that are dark amber that can open and shut smoothly. This bag is incredibly lightweight and easy to carry, although it would not be able to hold many objects due to its small size. The bag is approximately 6 inches tall including the lid and 7.5 inches long at the widest point. The lid is smaller than the base of the bag creating a downward flare. On the bottom of the bag there is text that reads ELSA MFG. CO. and underneath reads ST. LOUIS 3. MISSOURI.

Slightly underneath the text there is a small circular manufacturer stamp. The 1.4-inch lock is brass with an engraving on the inside, reading PRESTOLOCK CO. The metal clasp is spring loaded and automatically shuts close when pushed past a specific threshold. There is a metal hinge that holds the lid and the base together, opening and closing the lid. The bag shows some signs in wear because the right handle has fallen out of its socket on the base of the bag. On the right side there is also a small drip of plastic that has bubbles from the plastic casting.



Fig. 2. Plastic Handbag, ca. 1950s. Toronto Metropolitan University FRC2013.99.010. Photograph by FRC staff.



Fig. 3. Plastic Handbag bottom, ca. 1950s. Toronto Metropolitan University FRC2013.99.010. Photograph by FRC staff.

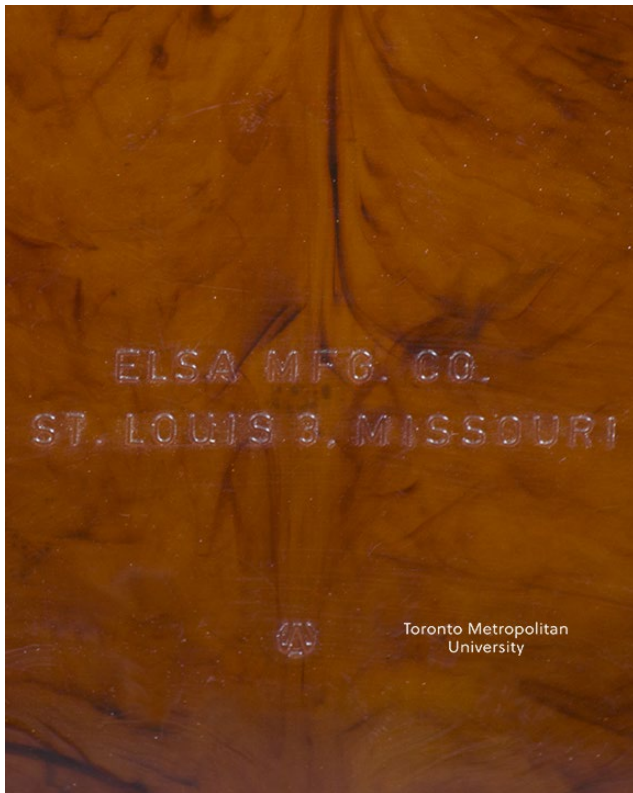


Fig. 4. Plastic Handbag manufacturing mark, ca. 1950s. Toronto Metropolitan University FRC2013.99.010. Photograph by FRC staff.

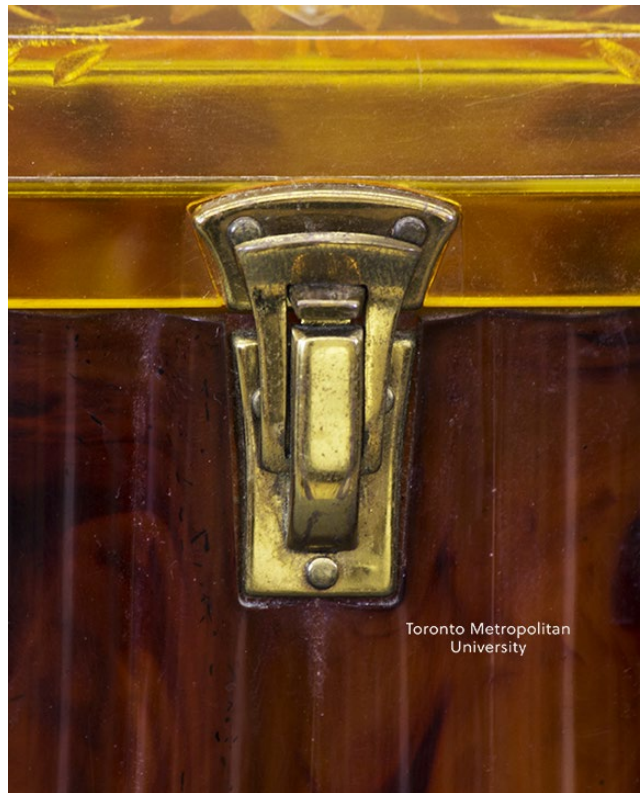
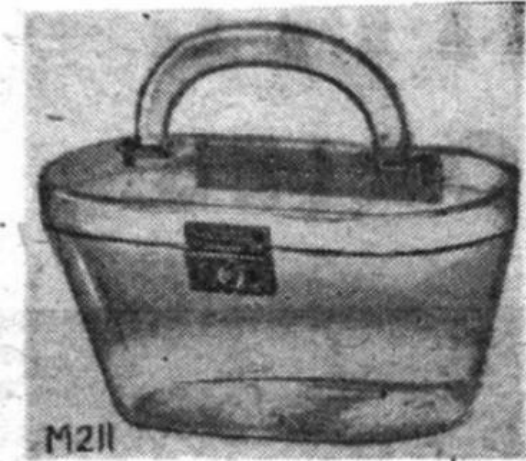


Fig. 5. Plastic Handbag lock, ca. 1950s. Toronto Metropolitan University FRC2013.99.010. Photograph by FRC staff.

Transparent Lucite For Popular Price



New to the popular-priced field is a transparent lucite binocular-shaped box for novelty handbag promotions. A conveniently sized, self luggage-like top-handle lends ease to the carrying of this bag. This bag is also available in colored lucite. From Hardy Plastics.

Fig. 6. Image from Women's Wear Daily "Transparent Lucite For Popular Price." Women's Wear Daily, vol.10, no. 20, July 14, 1950. ProQuest. <https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.lib.ryerson.ca/wwd/docview/1522636318/431DC33FF3824185PQ/1?accountid=13631>.

POPULARITY OF THE LUCITE BAG

The Lucite bag was extremely popular in the 1950's. After World War II, Americans were feeling very optimistic and were enjoying newfound economic growth. (Berkson, 14) Authentic Lucite purses were primarily made in New York and Florida and were marketed as practical and modern during a time where people were trying to forget about the war (Feld). Fortunately, Lucite could now be used for handbags instead of war related materials like curved windows for airplane cockpits (Johnson).

"The development of plastic handbags as an important fashion trend has reached a new high" -Handbags and Accessories, 1951

(qtd. In Berkson 14.)

These unique bags became extremely popular in major cities in the United States and although they seem unpractical now, their translucent beauty was captivating to consumers. These bags were primarily bought by younger women, which would start the influence of marketing to younger people in the 1960's. The Lucite handbag was expensive, ranging from \$20-\$70 in the 1950's (Feld). Women were spending what would be an equivalent of one month's rent to own one (Feld). There was much eagerness to buy these bags because they were unlike anything consumers had ever seen before. The overall popularity of the Lucite bag led to the bag's demise in the 1960's because they were being manufactured cheaply in factories around America and the evolution of fashion trends. Toronto Metropolitan University's replica bag exemplifies the notion of copying expensive Lucite bag and creating them out of plastic.



Fig.7. Image of translucent tortoiseshell stripe handbag. Image from *Carry me!: 1950's lucite handbags: an American fashion*, pg.21. Scanned from Toronto Metropolitan University Library.



Fig. 8. Image of translucent tortoiseshell handbag. Image from *Carry me!: 1950's lucite handbags: an American fashion*, pg. 47. Scanned from Toronto Metropolitan University Library.

Dec. 9, 1952

A. ROTHMAN
HANSBAG
Filed Sept. 13, 1952

Des. 168,376

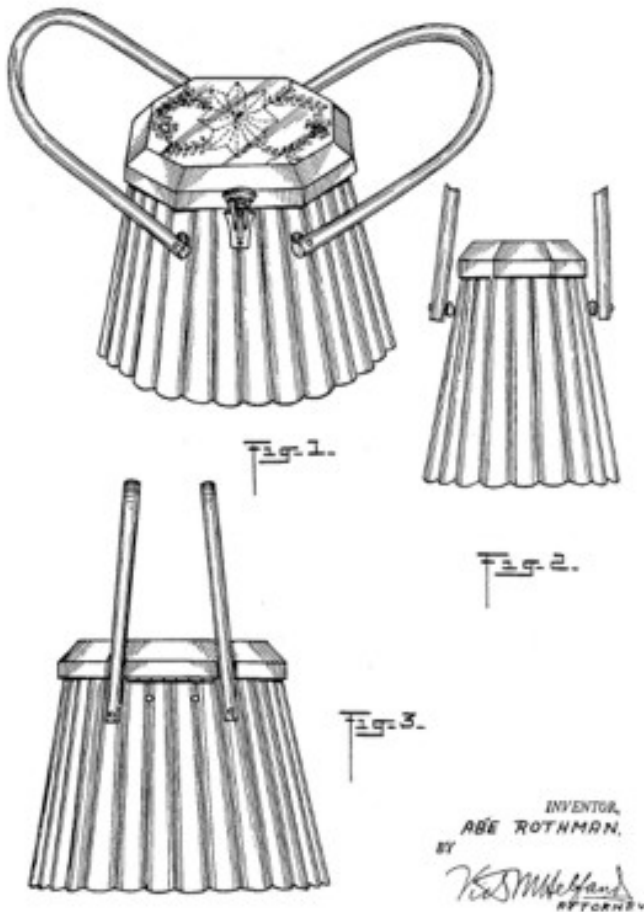


Fig. 9. Image of Abe Rothman's Patent of a plastic handbag. 1952. Image Retrieved from Google Patents. <https://patents.google.com/patent/USD168376S/en?q=abe&inventor=rothman>

INVESTIGATING TORONTO METROPOLITAN UNIVERSITY'S "LUCITE" TREASURE

The major question regarding the bag in the Toronto Metropolitan University Fashion Research Collection is what material it is made from and in what time period. Luckily, this design has a patent that is available online. The bag, according to Google patents, is from 1952, by designer Abe Rothman from New York (Rothman). Little information is known about Abe Rothman or what company he worked for, but from examining the bottom of the Toronto Metropolitan University Fashion Research Collection bag, it can be assumed that it was made by the manufacturing company ELSA MFG. CO. Underneath the company name it reads ST. LOUIS 3. MISSOURI. Considering this information, the bag was made by Abe Rothman for the Elsa Manufacturing Company. There is little to no information on this company other than there are other bags made by the same company. Lucite bags are an under-researched style of bag because of their growing popularity and the sparsity of Lucite handbags; they can be difficult to identify unless you are familiar with them.

I contacted a Lucite bag collector, curator, and shop owner of Deco Jewels in New York City, Janice Berkson, about the bag in the Toronto Metropolitan University Fashion Research Collection. I believed the bag in the Collection was made of Lucite and was from Rialto Products, a popular Lucite bag manufacturer. Fortunately, that theory was debunked by Berkson. In our email correspondence Berkson said,

“The “real” Lucite bags from the 1950’s were made by hand. The handbag in your photo was injection moulded by machine and manufactured by Elsa manufacturing. It is a cheap plastic made in the 50’s to look like the “real” more expensive handmade Lucite bags (Berkson).”

When I followed up on the potential material of the bag Berkson said,

“The bag is probably made using Acetate plastic which is a cheaper and a lighter weight plastic (Berkson).”

From this email correspondence, I am led to believe this bag, although patented at the height of Lucite popularity, is an inexpensive replica. The location the bag was manufactured would also explain why the bag was made in Missouri and not New York or Florida, the hubs of authentic Lucite. This information correlates with a statement in an article called Lucite Wonders,

“As upmarket versions grew more outlandish and expensive, mass-produced knockoffs started showing up at Woolworth’s and other discount stores for as little as \$1.98. Plastic bags went from being modern and practical to seeming old-fashioned and clunky. By the 1960s, the better bags were relegated to attics as vinyl became the new modern material (Feld).”

Pertaining to this source, the Lucite bags had become so mass produced it was not uncommon for women to find the bags for a lesser price.



Fig. 10. Plastic Handbag,
ca. 1950s. Toronto
Metropolitan University
FRC2013.99.010.
Photograph by Laura
Dionne, October 15th,
2020.

CONCLUSION

I can hypothesize the handbag in the Toronto Metropolitan University Fashion Research Collection is a replica bag of the immensely popular Lucite handbag in the 1950's United States. Although this bag is considered an imitation Lucite bag, it does not signify a lack of cultural significance. The rise and fall of the Lucite bag is not unlike other items in today's fashion system that become obsolete or are replaced. Fashion trends were initiated by elite consumers and then trickled down to lower social classes. This caused the elite to give up the fashion trends because of their overwhelming popularity with all classes. (Pouillard) Like many designer garments in New York, trendy Lucite bags were becoming more democratized in the fashion system. I believe Lucite became more popular with lower class consumers so the fashion elites became no longer interested.

This bag also demonstrates the influence of American handbag styles on the Canadian market. The Toronto Metropolitan University Fashion Research Collection has obtained this bag from an unknown donor, illustrating how these imitation bags have traveled across borders, becoming relevant for the modern, North American woman.



Fig. 11. Image of testing resin designs. Dionne, Laura. 7 Nov. 2020, Author's own image.



Fig. 12. Image of resin coasters drying and sample designs. Dionne, Laura. 7 Nov. 2020, Author's own image.

CONCLUSION

For my creative component, I chose to create a tortoise shell-inspired resin coaster. I wanted to see how difficult or easy it would be to create this pattern to try and understand how skilled people were creating designs for Lucite! The people who were making Lucite bags were incredibly skilled. Unfortunately, there is a lack of research on how hand made Lucite was crafted. For my mold, I used epoxy resin and had 3 alcohol-based colours; amber, dijon and red. I was unable to find a black alcohol-based colour, so I used an acrylic black paint. There was a lot of trial and error in making this design. I ended up having 2 cups of epoxy resin, one yellow toned and one amber toned. I experimented with the black designs.

The final two coasters resemble two types of experimental designs. One with black paint put on the bottom of the coaster mold and swished around with a toothpick after the resin was added. (Fig.13. Right) The second was perfect drops of black paint on the bottom of the resin mold followed by the addition of resin. (Fig.13. Left) The resin mold with the small dots was not moved with a toothpick but naturally moved as it was hardening. This was the biggest challenge when creating a pattern in resin. The resin moves around when drying. By conducting this experiment, I realized how complex resin casting would have been. People who can work "hands on" with plastic, are very talented and patient. I can see why this type of bag would have gone for such a high price in the 1950s.



Fig. 13. Image of dried resin coasters. Dionne, Laura. 7 Nov. 2020, Author's own image.

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